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ABSTRACT

The potential for creativity in the role of department chair is present, but, for too many chairs, creativity is an oxymoron and something to be preserved only in the ranks of the faculty. It would seem fitting to talk about the need for leadership and creativity in the educational setting. However, creativity seems to be overlooked in the literature in leadership in higher education. Various scholars have identified numerous qualities of a creative leader: attitudes; mental skills; communication skills; managerial skills; personal skills; and organizational climate. An informal poll of the academic chairpersons at St. Cloud University concerning what they do to approach their job with creativity yielded responses from only 20% of the chairpersons. Some of their statements were similar to the listing of qualities of a creative leader developed from the search of the literature. One way to nurture creative skills is to recognize that traditional management prescriptions may not fit the educational model. Another way to encourage creativity is to recognize specific blocks (including perceptual, emotional, cultural and environmental, intellectual and expressive, and organizational) to creative thinking and activity, and work to minimize the impact of these blocks. Administrators and institutions need to realize that department chairs are important resources and must help to find ways to maximize conditions for the enhancement of creativity. Chairs themselves must also see their jobs as challenges and as opportunities for personal growth and development. Contains 25 references. (RS)

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CREATIVITY AND THE DEPARTMENT CHAIRPERSON: CHALLENGE OR OXYMORON?

by
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positions but also to their personal beings.

Before embarking upon this topic, it is important to note that the climate surrounding the position of department chairperson may directly impinge upon the level at which creativity or innovation may occur. If a department chairperson is defined as "administration" with more autonomy in the traditional management sense, creative policies and procedures may be more the norm. At my university, one which operates under a collective bargaining agreement, department chairpersons are defined as "faculty" who ". . .provide academic and administrative coordination, and [who] foster an environment which enhances individual and departmental growth and development (IFO Agreement, 1991-93, p. 39)." Several of my university colleagues have described their chair positions as little more than mid-level managers who have lots of responsibility without the accompanying authority. Indeed, if creativity can be found in this type of department chair climate, it lies dormant and ready to be tapped in other settings.

Creativity and Educational Leadership

It would seem only fitting and natural to talk about the need for leadership and creativity in the educational setting. It is recognized that schools "must discover, develop, and sustain creative teachers and ideas in the same way successful corporations have done (Snyder & Anderson, 1987)." However, an ERIC search of the combined terms "higher education," "administration/leadership," and "creativity/innovation" surprisingly yielded few sources. Most were either studies of leadership and creativity in the industrial setting, or they were pieces calling for the need for creative leadership in schools. Abrell (1983, p. 103), for instance, notes that "creativity in educational organizations remains pretty much pie in the sky," and suggests that creativity is necessary to help educators meet formidable challenges. In today's world, discovery of opportunity depends on willingness to take risks with available scarce educational resources. Yet, when higher-level administrators tighten up to reduce risk, they sap others' abilities to respond to challenge--and, it is challenge that elicits creativity (Clarke, 1983).

Why is it that creativity seems to be overlooked in the literature on leadership in higher education? To illustrate, two of the key texts written specifically for the academic chairperson do not index either the term "creativity" or "innovation (Tucker, 1984; Bennett, 1983)." Instead, the chairperson role is seen as a paradox--the chair "is both a manager and a faculty colleague, an advisor and an advisee, a soldier and a captain, a drudge and a boss (Tucker, 1984, p. 4)." Although one suggested role of the chair is "entrepreneur," some chairs find this an unaccustomed role (Bennett, 1983, p. 168). Department leadership is discussed in these texts in terms of styles, but surprisingly enough, creativity is not included in a listing of necessary skills of an effective chairperson (Tucker, 1984, p. 49).

This is not to say that these texts are not useful for the academic chairperson, for they are extremely valuable for the untrained. Tucker's (1984) text provides a thorough guide to department leadership, planning, and management. Bennett's (1983) text provides case studies on a variety of problems likely to confront an academic chair. Recognition is given to the fact that developing academic chairpersons is a necessary venture for the institution. Thomas A. Emmet, in the foreward to Bennett's text, underscores this by suggesting that we recognize what the Japanese industry has long known--that the smallest working unit is the key to quality and productivity. He says we must recognize this fact in higher education. "Truly, the department chairperson is the key to real institutional vitality. For too long we have ignored this vital human resource (p. viii)." Tucker (1984, p. 4) even takes this further by stressing that:

> "A brilliant university or college administration with inept chairpersons cannot survive; an inept administration, with the help of a group of brilliant chairpersons, usually can."

Yet, while creativity may be implied as a chair's skill, it is never specifically identified nor encouraged. This is a mistake. It would seem that chairperson training could best be served by direct cultivation of and encouragement for leader creativity. Abrell (1983) approaches this most closely by listing ten ways that educational leaders themselves can become more creative and six ways that educational leaders can encourage creativity in their staff. Such suggestions as developing an attitude that accepts disorder as an opportunity for growth, and eliminating obstacles which impinge upon creativity are astute and worthwhile. In her humorous, tongue-in-cheek article on departmental governance, Pickering (1992, p. 62) suggests the importance of activities like "having faith in and supporting the release of human potential, . . . meeting the challenge of leadership as a dialogical relationship, . . . [getting] involved in the cutting edge of institutional issues." In the conclusion of his text, Bennett (1983) reports that chairpersons indicating high job satisfaction cite what could be construed as creative ventures contributing to that satisfaction. Factors listed included: influence over mission and curriculum, institution of new programs, and supporting successful individuals in the department. Others said that the job provided a challenge beyond the comfortable role of teaching and research.

In order to understand more specifically how department chairs can be more creative (and, thus more satisfied with their positions), it may be useful to turn to some of the general literature on creativity and leadership.

Qualities of a Creative Leader

A good deal of attention has centered upon the qualities that contribute to successful leadership of organizations. Creative leaders are labeled as "charismatic" (Conger, 1989), "visionary" (Hackman & Johnson, 1991; Hanna & Wilson, 1991),

"transformational" (Burns, 1978; Tichy & Devanna, 1986), and "change masters" (Kanter, 1983). While numerous qualities for effective leadership have been proposed as important, a review of the literature shows that it is generally agreed upon that creativity and innovation are essential (Chusmir & Koberg, 1986). As Kiechel (1988, p. 42) notes, "If there is one skill every business unit should have these days, . . . it is the ability to innovate, to devise new products and services and ways to make and deliver them."

Various scholars have identified numerous qualities of a creative leader which are categorized below:

Attitudes:

Has a healthy, productive outlook coupled with a sense of ownership and purpose (Hall, 1980).

Has a willingness to experiment and buck convention (Yukl, 1989; Conger, 1989).

Recognizes need for change (transformational) (Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Sees self as change agent (Tichy & Devanna, 1986).

Has a vision (Conger, 1989).

Has a willingness to take risks (Sinetar, 1985).

Feels a sense of urgency--a desire to make their ideas happen (von Oech, 1983).

Has a passion for what they do (von Oech, 1983).

Mental Skills:

Uses ingenuity, demonstrates insights as to priorities in handling day-to-day problems (Skolnik & Fried, 1977).

Trusts intuition (Conger, 1989; Quinn, 1980).

Deals well with ambiguity and change (Sinetar, 1985).

Distinguishes real pitfalls from the imaginary (Sinetar, 1985).

Communication Skills:

Encourages difference of opinion (Hall, 1980).

Allows for collaboration (Hall, 1980).

Is sensitive to people's needs (Quinn, 1980).

Employs participative, collaborative skills (Kanter, 1983).

Shares information and credit for innovations (Kanter, 1983).

Managerial Skills:

Appreciates and manages the reservoir of talent available to them (Hall, 1980).

Sees new uses of old resources (Hall, 1980).

Can, as a visionary leader, predict how changes in any aspect of the organization will affect other components (Hanna & Wilson, 1991).

Applies power and control intelligently (Hanna & Wilson, 1991).

Personal Skills:

Is able to articulate core values and able to persuade

and motivate (Conger, 1989).

Puts more effort into preparation, withholds judgment, builds in periods of incubation and isolation, and rewards self and others (Hackman & Johnson, 1991).

Practices lateral thinking, allowing integration of right brain and left brain functions (Hackman & Johnson, 1991).

Turns mistakes into opportunities (Sinetar, 1985).

Takes time for one's own projects--the formation of ideas that renew one intellectually (Boyer, 1989).

Recognizes organizational culture (Hanna & Wilson, 1991).

Recognizes impact of the surrounding environment (Hanna & Wilson, 1991).

In addition, the creative leader operates best within a certain *Organizational Climate:*

For optimal results, needs adequate financial support, assistance for experimentation, opportunities to communicate with colleagues, and varied approaches to problem-solving (Skolnik & Fried, 1977).

Needs freedom from standardization and rigid controls (Skolnik & Fried, 1977).

Operates in an environment where a lot of questions are asked (Amabile & Gryskiewicz, 1987).

Is able to position self around others who appreciate creativity (Abrell, 1983).

This latter factor is especially important. Although there are many times when we don't need to be especially creative--times when routines are indispensible, there are times when leaders need to be creative and generate new ways to reach objectives. Yet, just at that moment, blocks to creativity may occur which cause a good idea to be rejected or never pursued in the first place. These blocks to creativity may be perceptual, emotional, or organizational. Ways to counter these blocks will be explored later in this paper.

How Creative is the Academic Department Chairperson?

In an attempt to answer this question, I decided to informally poll the academic chairpersons on my own campus. I sent all of them a memo explaining the nature of my research and asking them to either jot down and send to me two or three things they do to approach their job with creativity, or to simply give me a call and I would record their thoughts over the phone. The results of this informal survey were quite interesting.

First of all, I only heard from 20% of my colleagues. Considering those who did not respond, I can presume a number of reasons for non-response. Perhaps they were simply too busy to respond--hopefully they were busy doing creative things for their departments, although the cynic in me believes they were probably busy with the mundane tasks a chair usually encounters in the day-to-day. Perhaps they were turf-protective and felt that my request for "good ideas" was either a display of my own ineptitude as a chair or a desire to raid ranks elsewhere. I was, however,

pleased that those who responded represented the diverse colleges at our university. It is possible that some chairs simply felt that they were not creative--perhaps it never occurred to them to consider it part of their job description, or they may have felt that creative efforts are rarely recognized or rewarded. Then, again, maybe my request intimidated a few chairs who felt that they should be creative, and maybe they are still on a quest for that creative thought. This was beautifully presented by a colleague who wrote:

> "I wish I could think of something I do that is creative --mostly I put out fires. And, when I'm not putting out fires, I'm trying to avoid starting them. Please share with me and others your results. I'll always steal a good idea!"

As I tabulated the bits of advice from campus colleagues, it struck me how similar some of their statements were to the listing of qualities of a creative leader listed above. Indeed, creative chairs talked about having an attitude of "vision." They felt that they needed to serve as an agent of change in terms of curriculum, staffing, and other initiatives. Communication skills of participative decision-making, discussion, and assessment of various role relationships of the chair vis-a-vis the department and institution were noted. They tended to be sensitive to organizational climate, recognizing the importance of reading the university culture and also keenly "staying within the mold, but not in a rut." They saw value in working within structure, but bringing forth innovation. In terms of management skills, creative leaders knew they had to do more with less, see each faculty member as a potential leader, and help colleagues to become creative. Creative chairs also cited valuable personal skills of time management, balance between work and leisure, and the importance of keeping active within their own professions.

Developing Creativity in Departmental Chairing by Removing the Roadblocks

If we know what sorts of creative skills we want in department chairpersons, how can those skills be nurtured? One way is by recognizing that traditional management prescriptions may not fit the educational model. Chairpersons are simultaneously unit leaders as well as faculty who may share with their department members what is not a surprising concern over close supervision, rigid objectives, and quantitative performance evaluation. Chairs should develop a mindset which encompasses more than a traditional managerial philosophy. According to Bennett (1983, p. 177), "leadership has to be highly situational--responsive to the cycle and rhythms of the organization." Morale and receptivity to innovation will vary with the institutional climate, but are important in determining what a chairperson can and cannot do.

Besides embracing this mindset, another way to encourage creativity is to recognize specific blocks to creative thinking and activity, and work to minimize the impact of these blocks. Many chairpersons have creative potential, but they need to discover what it is that sometimes prevents them from being

productive and creative problem-solvers. James Adáms (1986) suggests four types of creative blocks--perceptual, emotional, cultural/environmental, and intellectual/expressive. To this I have added another block which seems to erode the creative capacity of academic chairpersons--organizational blocks.

Perceptual Blocks. Perceptual blocks may include seeing what you expect to see, having an inability to isolate the problem, placing too many constraints on the problem, and being too close to the problem. I remember when I first began my term as chairperson, I felt frustrated because the former chair didn't have a specific set of guidelines for me when I began my term. After my first year, I saw the wisdom of this omission. There is something to be said for entering the position of chair with naivete and a fresh perspective; it does allow for creative approaches to problems. Sometimes it is also useful to stop worrying about the resolution of a problem and focus instead on supporting facts and data. There have been many times when I have discovered the answer to a scheduling dilemma or a budgetary difficulty simply by looking at a pattern of information I have laid before me. In addition, it may help to set aside a less timely problem you have been stewing over and turn your attention to something else. Amazingly, when you return to the first difficulty, you may surprise yourself when remedies occur spontaneously and easily. A chair should also realize that a policy decision does not always remedy a problem; there may be times when constraints only exacerbate the difficulty and when old-fashioned talk minimizes difficulties.

It is important to recognize when speaking of perceptual blocks that gender difference may be a significant factor. Chusmir & Koberg (1986) found that male and female managers did not differ significantly in the level of creative thinking, but for males it was need achievement that predicted creativity and for females the predictor was need affiliation. It is possible that the agendas selected and resolutions employed may reflect gender in chairperson creative endeavors.

Emotional Blocks. Fears and uncertainties, prevailing emotions, concern over failure all may tap our creative energies. Again, as a new chairperson, I remember worrying about every new request that passed my desk. Was I doing the job as I was supposed to? Would I disappoint (check where appropriate) the dean, the academic vice president, my colleagues, the former chair, myself? Most department chairs, drawn from faculty ranks, have had little prior administrative experience and may fear failure. They may also experience a great deal of stress as new responsibilities, expectations, and problems are dropped in their laps. It is important for chairs to demand some sort of limited training by their universities, and it is also useful to develop an informal chair network or mentoring process which can allow newer chairs to learn from veterans in the trenches. This becomes especially important for female chairs, often in the minority in terms of numbers.

Some of the emotional block comes from stress. Clarke (1983, p. 162) notes that "stress itself can suck the creative potential out

of slack available in the faculty workday, . . . [and it] produces deficits in performance that never appear on a budget printout." He discusses the importance of slack time--"non-directed activity devoted to reflection, discussion, casual debate, and planning." I have found it essential to engage in personal time-management which allows me time for walks, a mid-day stretch class, administrative preparation time, segmentation of my .55 release time for chair duties from other professional time, and so forth. I feel more refreshed and believe I am more creative because I allow myself this slack time. There are times when, walking along the river adjacent to campus, a solution to a vexing problem suddenly appears. Many times I surprise myself with the amount of energy I can recoup when I have taken mental and physical breaks. I also discover, by limiting departmental business to certain times of the day, that I am not overwhelmed by the mundane demands of the chair position.

Cultural and Environmental Blocks. Cultural taboos, societal norms, and reliance on tradition often block creativity. Some department chairs may find themselves stymied by the rigidity of department members who--for whatever reason--refuse to look at a new perspective. This is common when departmental members become aware of the fact that they may be comprised of groups of "old buffaloes" and "young turks"--the old-timers and the new blood of the department. Much can be said for the value of the entire department taking time out for a much needed administration-supported retreat to get reaquainted and realigned with one another. Pickering (1992, p. 61) indicates that ". . . sharing who you are--your own areas of conflict, confusion, growth, and excitement--can be empowering for both yourself and others." Attention to the process side of the department along with the product side can help nurture a spirit of creative venture for both the chair and the faculty.

One particular cultural taboo that bears mentioning here is the sometimes distorted belief that once a person becomes chair, their life is devoted solely to the good of the department. As Pickering (1992, p. 57) describes it, "On the day you become a department chair and cease being a regular faculty member, a transmogrification occurs that is similar to a prince or princess becoming a frog." While one may laugh at this, I recall being confronted by a faculty member on the very day I assumed my new position. He wondered when the new computers--still in their boxes in the chair's office--would be installed. I hadn't even gotten the seat of my new desk chair warm, and here I was--a totally new person! Faculty also resist becoming chairs because they will cease to be productive professionally. There is no need for this. With a bit of creativity, chairs can turn desires to obtain grant funding to projects that can benefit the department. In my department, we recently sought and obtained professional development money to do an alumni assessment survey--something that was difficult to do with tight budgetary constraints. In turn, department colleagues and I will share both the results and the process with other colleagues in other departments (part of a requirement of the grant). Scholarship interests need not cease, either. I have found dozens of outlets at conventions and through

publications to discuss department curriculum innovations, learn what colleagues across the country are doing in terms of long-range planning, and--yes--even explore creativity and the department chair!

Intellectual and Expressive Blocks. Adams (1986) suggests that the intellectual blocks come from using the wrong strategies to solve problems, from inflexibility, or from information deficiencies. Expressive blocks keep us from effective communication. Part of a chair's responsibility is to decide how and when to approach the dean, make a request, form a committee, approach an individual faculty member, and so forth. Mistakes are often made if the chairperson doesn't allow that valuable reflection time to determine strategy and presentation. I recall one time having to deal with a difficult staffing position. An announcement period at a department meeting grew into a rather lengthy discussion of procedures surrounding the current search. After the fact, faculty members came to me indicating that my allowing that dialogue to occur was valuable and healthy. I agreed. There are times when the creative "hunch" or the flexible approach can yield benefits far greater than assumed.

Organizational Blocks. The kinds of blocks that come to mind when I consider this roadblock to chair creativity include externally-paced requirements and time lines, limited monetary support, rigid accountability guidelines, administrative uncertainty, and cutbacks in release time. While businesses pride themselves on efficiency and expediency, it seems like academic institutions flourish on the reverse. One example comes vividly to mind--decisions on sabbaticals and staff release come <u>after</u> the due date for the master schedule. I remember remarking to a colleague that adminstrators should spend time in an academic chair's position for awhile and see the impact of various deadlines and decisions on the workload. Then there was the time when I wrote at least three summaries of summaries of a lengthy self study report for external review. While I eased the workload of the administrator who would have to read this report, the accountability guidelines cost me time and creativity.

This, again, is a good argument for the slack time that Clarke (1983) supports. Admittedly, he says that to many the slack time looks like waste--planning retreats, chairperson release time, attendance at workshops for department leaders, etc. But, when pressures are imposed (as they often are with the various and sometimes necessary blocks mentioned above), chair morale is weakened, productivity slowed, and creativity dissipated. The work of a chairperson may not be appreciated, and that lack of consideration or support is a blow to the very place where a department may instead need bolstering.

<u>Conclusion</u>

> "Important? Definitely. Overworked? Probably. Prepared for the job? Rarely. This is the typical academic department chairperson. Often almost stumbling into the job,

> the average chairperson takes quite seriously his or her new responsibilities even if how to meet them has to be learned along the way. Others in the institution can be grateful for this earnestness, because, whether appointed or elected to the job, the chairperson plays a key role in its workings. It is at the department level that the real institutional business gets conducted (Bennett, 1983, p. 1).

If we ask if it is possible to have creativity in the role of department chair, the answer is, "Yes, IF. . . ." The potential for creativity is certainly present, and chairs who report satisfaction with their jobs have discovered creative projects and outlets. But, for too many chairs, creativity is an oxymoron--a contradiction in terms--and something to be preserved only in the ranks of the faculty-at-large. Administrators and institutions need to realize that department chairs are important resources and must help to find ways to maximize conditions for the enhancement of creativity. Chairs themselves must also see their jobs as challenges and as opportunities for personal growth and development.

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